

The Kern River is a true gem of the West. Its headwaters, at the 14,494-ft. Mt. Whitney, are located just three hours north of one of the busiest cities in the U.S., Los Angeles. In stark contrast, 50 miles to the east of its headwaters is Death Valley, one of the driest places on earth.

The Kern River is the longest river in the Sierra Nevada, and in terms of whitewater, it is perhaps the most variable. Whitewater boating on the Kern offers a range of technical difficulty comparable to any river in the West, with runs ranging from Class II to Class V and V+. With proper training and sound judgment, whitewater boating on the Kern River is an exciting, safe and rewarding experience.

BOATING PERMITS AND MANIFESTS

The Forest Service and BLM require all private boaters of the Kern River to have in their possession a current annual permit. There is no charge for the permit, which may be obtained at the U.S. Forest Service offices in Lake Isabella or Kernville and the Bureau of Land Management office in Bakersfield. In addition, each party is required to fill out an activity log "manifest" and deposit it in a manifest box (located at most launch sites) prior to each trip.

Lake Isabella
Visitor Center
4875 Ponderosa Drive
P.O. Box 3810
Lake Isabella, CA 93240
(760) 379-5646

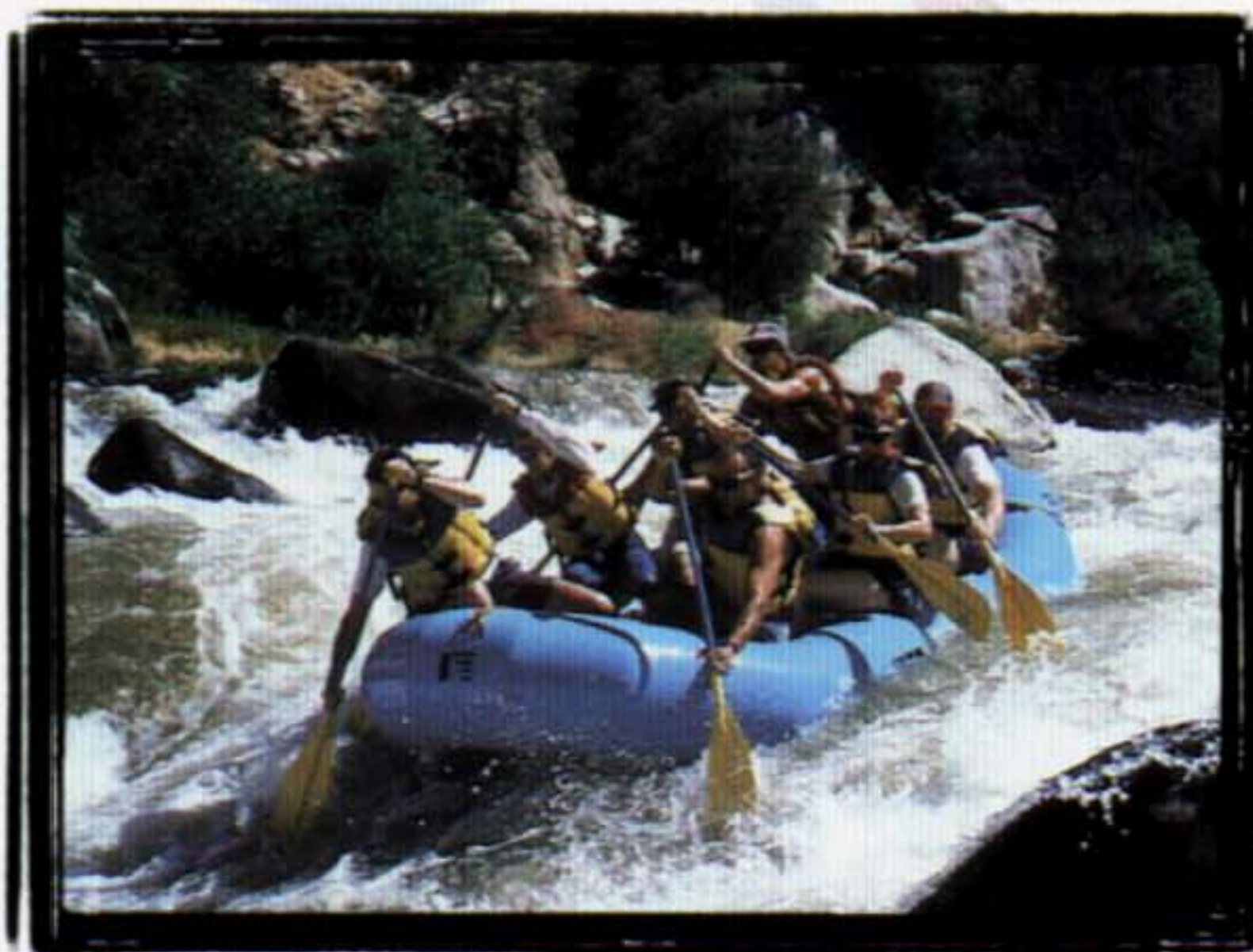
U.S. Bureau of
Land Management
Bakersfield Field Office
3801 Pegasus Drive
Bakersfield, CA 93308
(661) 391-6120

Cannell Meadow
Ranger District
105 Whitney Road
P.O. Box 9
Kernville CA 93238
(760) 376-3781

UPPER KERN

The upper section of the Kern River was given special protection in 1987 by the Wild and Scenic River Act. It offers relatively easy stretches (class II to III), such as the Powerhouse run, to such difficult stretches as Chamise Gorge or the Gold Ledge/Thunder runs. Many of the rapids may be scouted from the Sierra Way/Mtn. Highway 99 which travels parallel to much of the river.

This guide splits the upper Kern into 6 separate runs (after California Whitewater, Cassidy & Calhoun, 1984). The sections are divided by either a dramatic change in difficulty or necessary portages. Fairview Dam presently diverts 500 cubic feet per second (cfs) from the river and returns it at the Powerhouse KR3, where a short paved road leads to Kern River Powerhouse Facility No.3. A rough portage trail provides access around the dam and may be improved in the future as part of the powerhouse relicensing. The sections above the Fairview Dam and below the powerhouse, thus, have longer seasons than the partially dewatered middle sections. In wet years, the Limestone and Powerhouse runs may be raftable into August and boatable in kayak and canoes all year round, but in dry years, only into June. In wet years, the partially dewatered middle sections can be boated from about April to the middle of July, and in dry years perhaps not at all.



DEADMAN'S CURVE

OVERALL LOGISTICS

Upper Kern runs are easily accessed from the Sierra Way/Mtn. Hwy. 99, as it closely follows the entire stretch. Because this part of the river follows the road, launches and take-outs are governed by the levels of difficulty of rapids, time requirements and parking logistics.

CAMPING

There are numerous Forest Service camp sites along the Upper Kern River, both developed (fee) campgrounds and undeveloped (no fee) sites with minimal or no amenities (see map for locations and amenities).

UPPER KERN RIVER RUNS

Flow Information: www.spk-wc.usace.army.mil

Lake Isabella Visitor Center
(760) 379-5646

Kernville Ranger Station
(760) 376-3781

LIMESTONE RUN

Johnsondale Bridge to Fairview Dam

Difficulty: IV; V above 4000 cfs
Length: 2.4 miles
Gradient: 45 ft./mi.
Season: April-July

Recommended Levels: 800-3000 cfs at Kernville

Put in at the foot of Johnsondale Bridge below the parking area on river right. Take out on river left, a few hundred yards upstream of Fairview Dam. Parking here is limited. A rough portage trail (0.4 mile) provides access around the dam.

FAIRVIEW RUN

Fairview Dam to Calkins Flat Primitive Camping Area

Difficulty: III
Length: 2.8 miles
Gradient: 35 ft./mi.
Season: May-June
Recommended Levels: 1500 to 4000 cfs at Kernville
Flow on this section is actually 500 cfs less.

Put in 0.4 miles below Fairview dam, just below Bombs Away, a Class V rapid. Take out at Calkins Flat (river left).

CHAMISE GORGE

Calkins Flat to Salmon Falls

Difficulty: IV to IV+
Length: 2.2 miles
Gradient: 60 ft./mi.
Season: May-June
Recommended Levels: 1500-3000 cfs at Kernville
Flow is actually 500 cfs less here.

Put in at Calkins Flat Primitive Area (left bank). Take out Mi. 7.8-8.0 on left bank after Satan's Slot Rapid and before the treacherous Salmon Falls (Class VI) where removal from the river is mandatory.

GOLD LEDGE RUN (ANT CANYON + THUNDER + CABLE RUNS)

Ant Canyon to Camp 3 Campground

Difficulty: V
Gradient: 65 ft./mi.
Length: 7.2 miles
Season: May-June
Recommended Levels: 1500-3000 cfs at Kernville
Flow here is 500 cfs less.

Put in at Ant Canyon Primitive Camping Area. Take out on river left at Thunderbird Campground or below at Camp 3 Campground.



WHITEMAIDEN'S
WALKWAY



EWING'S RAPID

CAMP 3 RUN

Camp 3 Campground to the Powerhouse

Difficulty: IV
Length: 2.4 miles
Gradient: 50 ft./mi.
Season: May-June
Recommended Levels: 1500-4000 cfs at Kernville
Flow here is 500 cfs less.

Put in at the downstream end of the Camp 3 campground. Take out on left bank just below the Powerhouse (KR3).

POWERHOUSE RUN (LICKITY SPLIT RUN)

Powerhouse to Riverside Park

Difficulty: III-
Length: 2.0 miles
Gradient: 30 ft./mi.
Season: April-July
Recommended Levels: 600-6000 cfs at Kernville

Put in just downstream from the Powerhouse KR3. A short paved road marked Kern River Powerhouse acility No. 3 leads to the Powerhouse Day-Use Area. Take out river right at Kernville's Riverside Park.

RECOMMENDED RIVER SAFETY EQUIPMENT

One must have previous experience navigating rivers with comparable flows and class ratings as the stretch being planned. Know your limitations in the craft you will be piloting whether it be raft, kayak or canoe.

Recommended equipment:

- helmet (mandatory for kayakers and canoeists); recommended for rafting class IV and V
- emergency boat repair items
- air pump (rafts)
- life jackets (one personal flotation device (PFD) per person
- extra oar and/or paddle
- throw rope
- rafts should be equipped with a bowline
- first-aid kit
- drinking water, and snacks or lunch in dry bag
- wetsuits/dry suits (in early season or cold weather)
- knife
- whistle
- kayaks and canoes should be equipped with flotation bags
- canoes should be designed for use in whitewater
- canoes should be equipped with thigh straps

EMERGENCY PROCEDURES

In addition to filling out a river manifest, always leave information regarding your trip plans (entry and exit locations and times, number in your party, etc.) with a responsible person. In case of emergency, you may be located more easily. If the raft capsizes, or if you come out of your kayak or canoe, stay on the upstream side of it, preferably near the end of the boat. This allows better visibility and the potential of being pinned against obstacles is diminished. If rescue is not imminent, float downstream on your back with your feet downstream to fend off rocks. Do not try to grab tree branches or limbs—hydraulic pressure will pin and force your body underwater. Stay in the less obstructed moving water until you can identify a nearby safe eddy or slow water and then swim aggressively towards and into it.

PREPARED JOINTLY BY:

California Department of
Boating and Waterways



U.S. Bureau of
Land Management



U.S. Forest Service
Department of Agriculture



Photos by John Burmeister

Special Thanks to Breck McAlexander